



Current PhotoSynthesis group members, from left in the back row: Julianna Slomka, Diana Hayes, Seth Berkowitz, Doug McMillin, Michael Wall, Amy Melious, Bernadette Mertens-McAllister, Howard Fry and Nirmal Dryden; and from left in the front row: Christina Heinemann, Birgit Freybe Bateman, Alane Lalonde and Alan Bibby. (Howard Fry photo)

UPSTARTS NOW WELL-ESTABLISHED AS PHOTOSYNTHESIS CELEBRATES A QUARTER CENTURY

STORY BY ROBB MAGLEY

Photos as credited

It's about as "Salt Spring" a beginning as anyone could hope for.

PhotoSynthesis board chair Alane Lalonde likes to describe the group's loosely defined inception — she calls it the "prehistory" for Salt Spring's fine art photography exhibition — kicking off with a serendipitous hitchhiking encounter. In 1994, island photographer Osman Phillips was picked up by Fulford-based Mike Gluss; upon discovering their common passion for photography, Lalonde says, Gluss was suitably inspired to initiate a group show the next year called "A Gathering of Images" — the forerunner of what would become one of Salt Spring's most celebrated annual arts traditions.

By 2001 the show had moved into the lobby of the still-new ArtSpring facility, co-sponsored with both the Gulf Islands Community Arts Council and the Alliance of Salt Spring Artists (ASA), simply called "18 Photographers."

But by the encore the following year, a clear, direct ancestor of today's PhotoSynthesis show sprang forth, Lalonde says — built from a group of Salt Spring photographers who felt a bit like their art wasn't getting proper recognition.

"At the time, photography was a minor player in any of the group shows put on by the ASA," says Lalonde, "and didn't seem to be taken very seriously as an art form by other members."

The first show was called, suitably, "Photo Secession."

That name, a gently insurgent nod to a group show by photography pioneer Alfred Stieglitz at the turn of a previous century, stuck around for a few more years, according to Lalonde and PhotoSynthesis member Larry Melious, as island photographers continued to endure a certain amount of "pooh poohing" from artists in other mediums.

"Even to this day, photography is still kind of the red-headed stepchild of art," laughs Melious, "even though there's some amazing artwork being done. It's something we've dealt with since the very beginning."

"But," he adds with a smile, "we're steadfast in our faith in our art."

After "Photo Secession IV" the group polled its now-independent membership for ideas and voted in PhotoSynthesis. Now, as it celebrates its 25th anniversary exhibition this summer, the group show has become the longest continuously running fine art photography exhibition in British Columbia.

"It's just such a great group of members, and thanks to people really loving the photography it's continued over the years," says Lalonde. "We've been really fortunate to have this group."

Membership in PhotoSynthesis is exclusive to Salt Spring photographers, and participation in the annual show has been limited to current members; from time to time a member will take a year off, opening up space on the limited ArtSpring lobby wall for guest photographers who may eventually be invited to find a home with the group. And for several years PhotoSynthesis has invited a photography



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Anette Schrage's The Guardian.

student from Gulf Islands Secondary School to take part, a program Lalonde and Melious say has been rewarding for both the youth and adult artists involved.

“It’s good to see young photographers pressed into doing something all the way to the finish line,” says Melious. “How to mat and frame their photo, make it look good for the show. And some of it has been amazing — that’s really cool to see.”

The PhotoSynthesis show at its core is an earnest love letter to fine art photography, from Salt Spring Island photographers encompassing every corner of the form — from portraiture to wildlife, from digital compositing to wet prints, all of it at an exceptionally high level.

This summer, in celebration of a quarter century of independent art shows — and perhaps as another nod to that insurgent spirit — PhotoSynthesis is bending its own rules.

“For our 25th year, we’ve invited past members to join the exhibition,” says Lalonde. “We haven’t heard back from everyone, and a lot have moved away — but there will be far more photographers than usual.”

The group is also setting aside its usual stipulation that submitted work must be new this year, opting in the spirit of the celebration to let each photographer share an image they like best from their entire career.

“No matter what it is,” says Melious. “I think it will be interesting to see the artists go through their catalogues to try to select one — maybe two, depending on how many people respond.”

Lalonde said a rotating digital display option was also being arranged, particularly aimed at encouraging participation from PhotoSynthesis “alumni” who may live farther away than just a ferry ride.

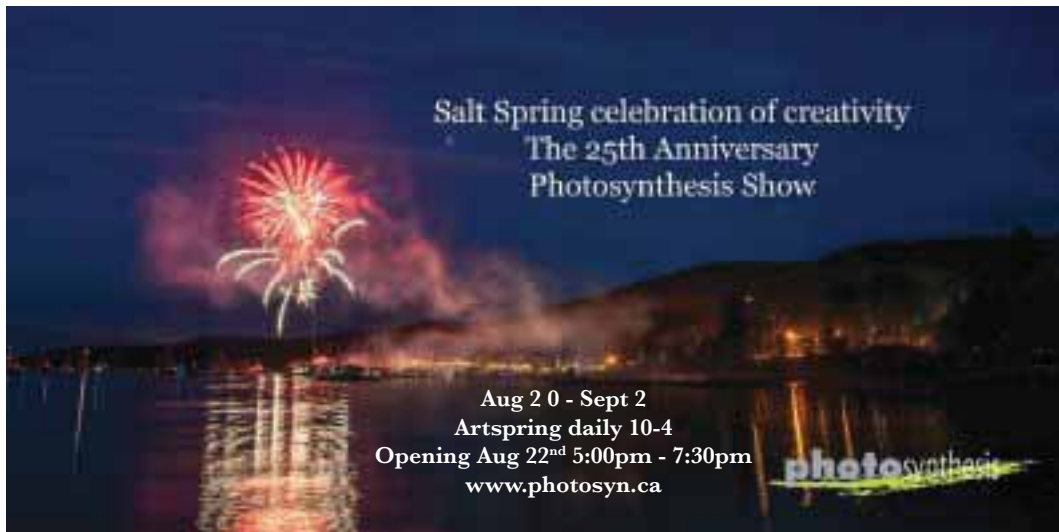
“A lot of great photographers are going to be joining us,” says Lalonde. “And we’ve reached out to families of a few amazing photographers who have passed away as we’d like to honour them, too.”

The duty of hanging the show falls again to Zoe Zafiris-Casey, who with a keen eye and firm hand will mark her third year of expertly installing and lighting the exhibit — a “thankless and stressful job, you know,” chuckles Melious, “what with the artists hanging around.”

There should be quite a few looking over Zafiris-Casey's shoulder, according to Lalonde. Slated for the exhibit are photographs from current members Birgit Freybe Bateman, Seth Berkowitz, Alan Bibby, Nirmal Dryden, Howard Fry, Diana Hayes, Christina Heinemann, Susan Huber, Avril Kirby, Alane Lalonde, Doug McMillin, Larry Melious, Amy Melious, Bernadette Mertens-McAllister, Pierre Mineau, Brian Purcell, Anette Schrage, Julianna Slomka and Michael Wall; and past members June Boe, David Borrowman, John Denniston, Janet Dwyer, Gregg Eligh, Timothy Gibbon, Tamar Griggs, Greg Klassen, Michael Levy, Sam Lightman, Shari Macdonald, Judy McPhee, Eric Onasick, Osman Phillips, Gilleen Proctor, Chris Stackhouse, Ron Watts and Jana Zachariou.

Sponsors this year include Country Grocer and Thrifty Foods, who have made the ArtSpring show possible — running from Wednesday, Aug. 20 until Tuesday, Sept. 2, with the daily exhibition open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and an opening night gala Friday, Aug. 22 from 5 to 7:30 p.m.

More information is available at PhotoSynthesis' website — designed by Christina Heinemann — photosyn.ca. ☀





Above: Ice 26 - Carried Away by Janet Dwyer, one of the past PhotoSynthesis photographers invited to exhibit for the 25th anniversary show running from Aug. 20 through Sept. 2 in the ArtSpring gallery.

Below: From 2004, Seth Berkowitz stands with his Life Boat 1 photograph during the "Photo Secession" era of the PhotoSynthesis legacy. (Driftwood file photo)

From 2017: Bernadette Mertens-McAllister with portraits of herself and her sister in a sorrow-themed series. (Driftwood file photo)



Above: Gaff Rig Schooner by Larry Melious, for the 2025 show.



Diana Hayes' Ulrike's Sea Horse (from 2016), left, and Birgit Freybe Bateman's Plugged In (from 2011).

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